DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 125 FL 019 099

AUTHOR Aghbar, Ali-Asghar
TITLE Fixed Expressions in Written Texts: Implications for Assessing Writing Sophistication.
PUB DATE Oct 90
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at a Meeting of the English Association of Pennsylvania State System Universities (October 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; College Students; English (Second Language); Evaluation Criteria; Higher Education; *Idioms; *Language Patterns; *Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; *Proverbs; Second Language Instruction; Test Construction; *Writing Evaluation

ABSTRACT

A writing test was developed with validation based on the assumption that the use of formulaic language is an important aspect of language proficiency and should be considered in assessing native and non-native English proficiency. Formulaic language is defined as language chunks learned and used together (e.g., "false sense of security"), including idioms, proverbs, common sayings, collocations, and short-set and long-set expressions. The test consisted of 50 sentences, each containing one formulaic verb-and-noun expression. In each expression, the verb was missing, and examinees were required to supply the verb most likely to be used in a formal written context. Participants included 27 university teachers of English, 44 American sophomore and junior university students, and 97 entering university students of advanced English as a Second Language (ESL). As expected, faculty provided the most appropriate responses and did so the most frequently. The American students provided common responses but showed less familiarity with the more formal combinations, and ESL students provided the least common and least appropriate responses. It was concluded that a test with rarer and more formal items from written discourse is likely to show greater difference among native speakers. Full response tabulations from the five test items are presented. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED329125

FIXED EXPRESSIONS IN WRITTEN TEXTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSING WRITING SOPHISTICATION

Ali-Asghar Aghbar
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

In a recent cartoon published in World Press Review (October 1990), an overweight woman tells her overweight husband, "It seems we were lulled into a false sense of security by non-fat frozen yogurt." What makes this string of words a meaningful English sentence? A usual linguistic response is that it contains words with the correct word classes that are put together according the rules of English grammar. A closer look reveals that there is more to this sentence than words and grammar. Let me focus only on what has been referred to as formulaic language. Formulaic language can be roughly defined as language chunks that consist of more than one word and that are learned and used as such. In the cartoon sentence, there are several examples of formulaic language:

be lulled into
sense of security
a false sense of security
frozen yogurt
non-fat frozen yogurt

I call these instances of formulaic language because I believe they were not constructed creatively for the first time by the cartoonist; rather, the readers are assumed to have a memory of having heard or seen these construction before and use them as such. In this paper, I will argue that formulaicity is an important aspect of language ability and that it should be considered in assessing native and non-native students' language ability in English.

Perhaps the most obvious kind of formulaic language is idioms such as these:

IDIOMS
- -take for granted
- -spill the beans
- -get off someone's back
- -beat around the bush
- -fly off the handle

In an idiom, some of the words lose their original meaning and the idiom takes on an entirely new meaning of its own.

This paper was presented at 1990 EAPSU Conference. (EAPSU is the English Association of Pennsylvania State System Universities.)

FL019099

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A.A. Aghbar

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Proverbs and sayings are also instances of formulaic language. However, unlike idioms, the words in these expressions maintain much of their original meaning. Proverbs contain words of wisdom while sayings are often marked by exaggeration and colorful use of imagery. Here are some examples:

PROVERBS

-Birds of feather flock together.
-A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
-Action speaks louder than words.
-An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

SAYINGS

-I'm too old a cat to be fooled by a kitten.
-He could squeeze a nickel till the buffalo hollers.
-He's too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash.
-If bullshit was music, you'd have a brass band.

Collocations are less obvious examples of formulaic language. Here are some examples:

COLLOCATION

-rave review
-crying shame
-booster rocket
-gain access
-frozen assets

A collocation consists of two words that are linked together in our memory.

There are other larger groups of words whose constituents are also linked together in our memory. Like collocations, they are acquired and used as chunks. For lack of better terminology, let us call such multiword strings "short set expressions" and "long set expressions. Here are some examples:

SHORT SET EXPRESSIONS

-tied closely to
-at an early age
-simple way of life
-at one point or another
-on a regular basis

LONG SET EXPRESSIONS

-(He) places great importance on...
-(She)is very mature for her age
-There can be no such thing as...
-You don't seem to realize...
-With only few exceptions

The command of language chunks like those above is a major part of our fluency (Fillmore 1979), but, unlike grammar and vocabulary, they have not received the linguistic attention they deserve. This is in no way to undermine the importance of grammar and vocabulary. Children learn an awesome body of grammatical rules and lexical units in their native language. It has been said that what a native speaker of English intuitively knows about her language is far greater than the combination of all the rules of English grammar compiled in thousands of books on the structure of English (cf. Krashen 1982). As for lexical knowledge, it is estimated that school children in the U.S. know over 10,000 words at Grade 3 and continue to acquire over 3,000 words per year in the rest of their school years (Nagy and Herman 1987). What we often fail to recognize is that the knowledge of formulaic language is no less significant.

In my rough estimation, The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English (Benson, Benson, and Ilson 1986) contains over 60,000 listings of word combinations that are used formulaically in both spoken and written English. This is only a partial listing of collocation and short set expressions. Here are two sets of examples from page 223:

sheet
bed sheet
cotton sheet
percale sheet
double sheet
fitted sheet
flat sheet
king-sized sheet
queen-sized sheet
single sheet
twin sheet
to change the sheets
to put on clean sheets
balance sheet
flow sheet
blank sheet
scandal sheet
charge sheet
cookie sheet

Ship
build a ship
refit a ship
launch a ship
navigate a ship
sail a ship
scuttle a ship
sink a ship
torpedo a ship

abandon ship
jump ship
raise a sunken ship
load a ship
unload a ship
capital ship
hospital ship
merchant ship
oceangoing ship
passenger ship
rocket ship
etc., etc.

It is important to keep in mind that, although the construction of such chunks by and large follow the lexical and grammatical rules of English, we recognize them as formulaic only because we have a previous memory of them. In an intriguing article, Bolinger (1976) cleverly demonstrates that memory is more important than grammar in our recognition and use of formulaic language. For example, we say, long ago but not short ago while we have both a long time ago and a short time ago. It is also interesting that centuries ago sounds good but millennia ago doesn't. Bolinger provides another set of examples with else. We say somebody else but not some person else. We accept where else and who else but which else sounds questionable and when else is unacceptable. As Bolinger points out, with such language chunks, memory as well as grammatical reason determines what is acceptable and what is not.

Given that the proper recognition and use of formulaic language is based more on memory than on creative construction through the use of grammatical and lexical rules, it should follow that the more experience with a language we have had, the better memory of its formulaic expressions we should have. I found this to be the case in a pilot experiment I did with a set of verb-and-noun combinations such as realize goals and achieve success. My interest in doing this experiment developed as a result of reading ESL (English as a second language) compositions; I noticed that my ESL freshmen were frequently using the verb get with nouns such as the following:

_____ success
_____ knowledge

To assess ESL students' command of short formulaic expressions like those just mentioned, I made a test consisting of 50 sentences each containing one such verb-and-noun combination. Here are the directions and a sample of test items:

In each of the following sentences a verb is missing. Supply the verb that you think will best fit each sentence. Imagine these sentences are from formal written texts; therefore, when more

than one verb is possible, choose the verb that is appropriate for formal written contexts. Please use only one verb in each blank. Do try to respond to every item because partial credit will be given to answers that are partially correct.

1. If we want to _____ our future goals, we must work diligently now.

2. This is a good opportunity for you to _____ knowledge in your field of study.

The following groups participated in the experiment:

27 colleagues teaching English courses at Indiana U. of PA
44 American sophomore and junior students at IUP
97 ESL students entering IUP

I originally designed the test for ESL students and got native speakers of English to take in order to collect a list of possible responses for each item. The ESL students were all advanced in their English and their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores ranged between 500 and 650.

The results were as expected: the English faculty provided the most appropriate responses and did so the most frequently; the American students provided common responses but they showed less familiarity with the more formal combinations; and the ESL students provided the least number of common and appropriate responses. I discuss some of the test items and their responses below.

The ESL students did well on the test items where get is a desirable possibility. Here are three examples:

-Where did you _____ this information?
-Many foreign students believe they can _____ a good education in the United States.
-Mary was not able to _____ her parents' attention as they were always busy.

It may be that even in the above instances many ESL students were using get as a general verb rather than the specific verb that they thought would be the most appropriate. This hypothesis is born out by the ESL students' performance on the majority of the items where more than a quarter of the ESL students provided get as their response where other more specific verbs were desirable. Here are some examples of such items:

-This is a good opportunity for you to _____ knowledge in your field of study.

-Nigeria _____ independence from Great Britain in 1960.
-My best friend tried to _____ admission to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, but he did not succeed.
-He tried to _____ access to my computer files.
-The United States tried to _____ the support of other nations for its military operations in the Persian Gulf.
-Diligence is one good means of _____ success.
-She tried to _____ Bill's affection by cooking for him.
-I am gradually _____ competence.
-It was not easy, but I finally succeeded in _____ his confidence.

In those of the above items where get is the least desirable response, the ESL students were the only group that chose this verb. Note that the ESL students' performance is not simply due to poor vocabulary acquisition since most of the appropriate words required for the test are simple, high-frequency words as achieve, find, gain, and win. Rather, the reason is lack of acquisition of those language chunks that make discourse fluent and idiomatic.

But what about the native speakers? Did they vary in their choice of verbs? In the majority of the items including the ones already listed above, there was not a significant difference between the faculty and the students. However, in several cases, more English instructors than students were able to provide the most appropriate responses. Below I will list some such items and will include the exact number of the responses for five most frequently used verbs for each item: (I have underlined what I consider the most appropriate response.)

-If we want to _____ our future goals, we must work diligently now.

RESPONSE	ENGLISH FACULTY	AMERICAN STUDENTS	ESL STUDENTS
achieve	44%	48%	36%
realize	15%	2%	4%
reach	15%	18%	21%
attain	11%	18%	3%
accomplish	4%	11%	5%

-The United States has been trying to _____ intelligence on Iraq's intentions in the Persian Gulf for a long time.

RESPONSE	ENGLISH FACULTY	AMERICAN STUDENTS	ESL STUDENTS
gather	33%	7%	6%
acquire	18%	12%	1%
gain	18%	21%	2%
obtain	7%	4%	2%
secure	7%	00%	00%

-I will strive to _____ my ideals.

RESPONSE	ENGLISH FACULTY	AMERICAN STUDENTS	ESL STUDENTS
achieve	26%	16%	8%
realize	28%	2%	3%
live up to	7%	00%	00%
reach	7%	12%	13%
attain	4%	7%	1%

-He _____ pneumonia as a result of working long hours in the cold and damp while he had the flu.

RESPONSE	ENGLISH FACULTY	AMERICAN STUDENTS	ESL STUDENTS
contracted	33%	4%	1%
caught	22%	21%	15%
got	18%	48%	32%
developed	11%	00%	3%
suffered	4%	00%	13%

-In a movie I saw recently, a father tries to _____ vengeance on his son's killers.

RESPONSE	ENGLISH FACULTY	AMERICAN STUDENTS	ESL STUDENTS
take	33%	18%	20%
wreak	33%	00%	2%
seek	7%	30%	7%
exact	4%	00%	00%
get	4%	18%	18%

Though it was not my part of my original intention to examine the difference in the performance of the native speakers, I found the difference intriguing. A test with rarer and more formal items from written discourse is likely to show a greater difference among the native speakers.

I believe the proper use of the proper registers of formulaic language is and important aspect of language ability and writing sophistication and that it deserves a closer look in assessing writing fluency.

REFERENCES

Benson, M., Benson, E., and Ilson, Robert (Compilers). 1986. The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English: A Guide to Word Combinations. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Bolinger, D. 1976. Meaning and Memory. Forum Linguisticum 1(1): 1-14.

Fillmore, Charles J. 1979. On Fluency. In: C. Fillmore, D. Kempler, W. Wang (eds.). Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behavior. NY: Academic Press.

Krashen, Stephen. 1982. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. New York: Pergamon Press.

Nagy, William E. and Patricia A. Herman. 1987. Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge: Implications for Acquisition and Instruction. In: McKeown, M. G. and Mary E. Curtis (eds.) The Nature of Vocabulary Acquisition. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Asso.